

# Left-Handed Pupils In A Right-Handed Learning Environment: A Case Of Primary Schools In Vihiga County, Kenya

**Bernard Lushya Misigo**

Moi University, Kenya

**Abstract:** *Left-handed pupils have had a long history of discrimination across many cultures in the world, yet in Kenya no research has investigated the extent to which left-handedness is understood and encouraged in our schools. This study explored the lived experiences of 26 primary school pupils and views of 12 primary school teachers on the teaching and learning experiences of these pupils. The findings revealed that left-handed pupils reported no discrimination in schools. They had positive perceptions of their writing in terms of neatness. They also reported that their peers did not understand them, and that their teachers were too fast while teaching. Teachers mentioned the need for training, and specialized equipment for left-handed pupils. The results are discussed in terms of implications on the teaching of left-handed pupils.*

**Keywords:** *Experience, left-handedness, teaching, learning environment, Equipment.*

Left-handed pupils have had a long history of discrimination across many cultures in the world (Annett, 2002; Coren, 1989; Hampshire, 2009; Orr, 2001), yet in Kenya there is no research on the learning experiences of left-handed pupils. There is no empirical study that can inform teachers about the best ways to teach these pupils in schools. The available literature about them reveals that left-handed people, particularly children have had a rough time in educational institutions.

Many have been forced to use their right hand for tasks such as writing (Hampshire, 2009; Milsom, 2008; Orr, 2001). Siebner et al. (2001) claimed that in German schools until a few decades ago children were forced to write using their right hand. According to Healey (2001), and Milson (2008), some left-handed learners who are forced to change feel resentful and frustrated. Whereas, others experience disturbance in speech, memory, concentration, and have poor self-esteem as a result of forced change in handedness.

Literature on left-handedness remains scanty. However, available research focuses on writing style (Athenes & Guiard, 1991; Medwell, 2012; Peachey, 2004; Phillips, Galluci & Bradshaw, 1991). Hawkyard, Dempsey, and Arthur (2014)

revealed that left-handed students interviewed claimed that right-handers were neater and faster when writing. Almost all left-handed students claimed that they preferred using left-handed scissors in the classroom, although these were not always provided by schools. Hawkyard et al. noted that left-handed discrimination had been mentioned by a number of teachers but there was no evidence that it still occurred.

Hawkyard et al. (2014) however, noted that the findings of their study could not be extrapolated to other areas. They recommended for further research to clarify the experiences of left-handed students in other areas, and determine the extent to which modern left-handed equipment was available.

Although in the developed world writing using the left hand is now generally accepted in schools (Paul, 1990). However, little is known about the experience of left-handed learners in Kenya. It is claimed that in some primary schools in Kenya, particularly the lower classes, teachers still force left-handed pupils to use the right hand during writing lessons (Samuel and Josephine, in personal communication, January 8, 2015). This study therefore, sought to investigate the learning experiences of primary school left-handed learners,

and the opinions of primary school teachers with regard to left-handed pupils.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions answered by this study were:

- ✓ What are the learning experiences of the primary school left-handed pupils?
- ✓ What opinions do primary school teachers have about left-handed pupils?
- ✓ Are primary school teachers trained to handle left-handed pupils?
- ✓ Do primary schools have equipments specially designed for left-handed pupils?

## METHOD

Scanty information exists about the experience of left-handed learners in Kenyan primary schools; therefore, a phenomenological study was deemed necessary to explore this experience. According to van Manen (1990) a researcher using phenomenological approach is interested in the meaning found within a person's private experience. Phenomenological approach is useful in capturing the lived experiences into textual expression of essence (Creswell, 2007).

## PARTICIPANTS

According to Smith (2004) a phenomenological study is premised on the fact that it is only possible to obtain accurate account of lived experience through a small sample. Therefore, twelve primary school teachers and twenty six pupils were purposively selected to participate in this study. These pupils were aged between 8-13 years. These pupils were recruited upon getting consent from their parents and teachers. Written consent was also obtained from teachers who participated in this study. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and no harm shall happen to them during this study.

## DATA COLLECTION

The author conducted individual, face to face, semi-structured interview with participants. It took about 15 minutes to interview each pupil, and approximately 20-30 minutes to interview each teacher.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants. Identifying information was not obtained from the participants.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) was used to analyze data. IPA is concerned with how participants make meaning from lived experiences and perceptions. The researcher scrutinized and transcribed interview responses several times to identify recurring themes.

The researcher and his assistant independently coded the responses about the lived experiences of the left-handed pupils in schools, the opinions of teachers regarding the teaching of left-handed pupils were sought. This analysis was done by hand because the small data base. During coding, data was segmented and texts were labeled to develop descriptions and themes, and to identify repetitions, similarities and differences (Mac Queen, McClellan, Kay, Milstein, 1998; Ryan & Bernard 2003).

Pupils and teachers interviews were coded differently. An independent evaluator with experience in conducting interviews verified and analyzed the same transcripts. There was an 80% agreement between the researcher and the independent researcher assistants on the number of codes and their labels.

## FINDINGS PUPILS

Data analysis yielded the following themes: handwriting, learning experience, sitting position, treatment, equipments, and challenges emerged from the data analysis. Each of them were illustrated by examples using direct quotes from participants.

### HANDWRITING

Left-handed pupils reported that their handwriting was neat. One participant stated, "My handwriting is good". These participants' positive perceptions of their handwriting suggest that left-handed pupils believe that their handwriting was neat compared to right-handers.

### LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Majority of the learners reported positive experiences while interacting with their colleagues inside and out of class. One of the pupils reported that:

*My friends do not laugh at me for being left-handed.*

Another said that:

*Other students do not ridicule me for being left handed.*

However, four out twenty six participants reported that they faced some problems while interacting with other pupils. One participant stated:

*My friends do not understand me because my direction of doing things is not as theirs.*

Another one said:

*I am not comfortable, those sitting to my left side interfere with my left hand. Sometimes friends and teachers tease me.*

### SITTING POSITION

With respect to sitting position, most of the pupils reported that they preferred sitting at the left side of the desk so that they could not disrupt their colleagues and write easily because they slant their books while writing.

**ONE PUPIL STATED:**

*I sit in front at the left side of the desk so that I do not disturb others, and write easily.*

**ANOTHER PUPIL REPORTED THAT:**

*I prefer sitting in front and at the edge of the desk.*

## TREATMENT

Majority of the pupils reported that they did not have problems with the teachers because of writing using the left-hand. Some of the pupils said that their teachers encouraged them to use their right hand when writing. One pupil said, "teachers ask me to try doing things with my right hand". Another one said, "yes, they only encourage me, but they do not punish me for failure to use my right hand".

**ONE PARTICIPANT REPORTED:**

*My teachers tell me to try coping letters and words using my right hand.*

**ANOTHER ONE STATED THAT:**

*We are not given special treatment. We are treated equally as right handed pupils.*

**ANOTHER ONE SAID THAT:**

*My teachers don't harass me though they treat me as a special case for iam slow, sometimes friends laugh at me.*

## TEACHERS

Teachers reported the following main themes: handwriting, handwriting issues, and treatment of left-handed pupils, equipments, and training.

## HANDWRITING

Teachers who participated in this study believed that right-handed pupils were faster and neater in hand writing than their left-handed counterparts.

**A TEACHER COMMENTED:**

*Right-handed pupils are faster and neater in handwriting compared to left-handed pupils.*

**ANOTHER ONE STATED THAT:**

*Left-handed pupils write slowly and are abit untidy as compared to right-handed pupils.*

**ANOTHER ONE SAID THAT:**

*Most right-handed pupils right faster and neatly. Some left-handed pupils are slow, not keen in writing and tend to slant letters.*

## TREATMENT

Another common theme was teachers handling of left-handed pupils in class. These participants said that all pupils whether right-handed or left-handed were treated equally. Left-handed pupils were not given special treatment. Some of the teachers believed that left handed pupils were talented. However, two teachers reported they used force to make left-handed learners to write using the right hand.

**ONE OF THE PARTICIPANT MENTIONED:**

*We encourage them to use their right hand by talking to them politely and showing them how to handle a pencil.*

**ANOTHER ONE SAID:**

*we encourage left-handed pupils to use their right-hand in school and sometimes abit of force is used to do so*  
**WHEREAS, ANOTHER ONE SAID:**

*I use threats and caning to make them write using the right hand*

## EQUIPMENT

Teachers who participated in this study reported that there were no special equipment in their schools specifically meant for the left-handed pupils. There were no pencil grips, sharp pencils or special chairs designed for them because all learners shared a bench and one desk.

**ONE PARTICIPANT STATED THAT:**

*No special equipment for left-handed pupils is available. They need special pencils to help them shape their letters correctly.*

## TRAINING

Training theme was frequently mentioned by the participants. The result revealed that no teacher had undergone formal training on how to teach left-handed pupils.

**A TEACHER REMARKED:**

*We were not taught how to teach left-handed learners.*

**ONLY ONE OUT OF THE THIRTEEN PARTICIPANTS REPORTED THAT:**

*I underwent special education course that encouraged us to support left-handed pupils.*

## GOVERNMENT POLICY GUIDELINES ON LEFT-HANDEDNESS

All the teachers who participated in this study reported that they were not heard of any policy that talked about left-handed pupils or people.

**ONE PARTICIPANT SAID:**

*I have not heard of any Government policy regarding left-handed pupils.*

**ANOTHER PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDED THAT:**

*The Government should make special days or fora for left-handed people to share their experiences. The society should also be sensitized so that people accept left-handed pupils since they are normal pupils.*

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of left-handed pupils in schools, and their teachers views on the treatment of left-handed pupils, handwriting, training of teachers, and equipment in schools. The study revealed inconsistent findings about handwriting between the left-handed pupils and their teachers. Most of the left-handed participants considered their handwriting to be neat and faster compared to their right-handed peers. Whereas, teachers believed that left-handed pupils were slow and untidy compared with the right-handed pupils.

These findings concurred with Hackney (1997) who reported that since writing takes place from left to right, the left-handed people cannot see what they write because their hand covers the writing. Consequently, this causes left-handed children to be slower, awkward, and uncomfortable in their hand and body positions, and they experience more fatigue when engaged in prolonged periods of working. It however, contrasted with Coates (1996) who revealed that there was no

significant difference in speed and quality of left-handed and right-handed writing.

Issues concerning handwriting for left-handed pupils, Sitting position, and writing appears to pose problems for the left-handed mechanically and socially. Since writing takes place from left to right, the left-handed hooked style of hand posture interfered with their right handed colleagues. Majority of the left-handed pupils thus preferred sitting at the left side of the desk so that they could not disturb their colleagues.

With regard to treatment of left-handed learners in school, this study revealed inconsistent findings. Whereas, majority of the pupils reported that their teachers and fellow learners did not discriminate them on account of their left-handedness. A few of them reported that some of their friends did not understand them; they tease and laugh at them. Some teachers also mentioned that some pupils laughed at left-handed pupils.

Intriguingly, this study revealed that some teachers still forced learners to use their right hand for tasks such as writing. This finding was in agreement with (Hampshire, 2009; Milson, 2008; Orr, 2001) who claimed that left-handed learners had in the past had a rough time in school; many were forced to change from left to right hand while writing. According to Milson (1995) in the past teachers would trap the knuckles of a child who tried to use his/her left hand. Teachers would tie the left arm behind a Child's back to make the right hand the only usable hand.

In modern time as revealed in this study teachers encourage left-handers to use the right hand by talking to them politely and showing them how to handle a pencil well. However, a few teachers said that they used a bit of force and threats to change from left hand to the right hand. This is an indication that left-handedness has not been fully appreciated in our society, and teachers lack training in the teaching and handling of left-handed learners. Participants also reported that they faced some challenges as left-handed people. They reported having problems making friendship during games or participating in sports because these activities seemed to be made for the right-handed people.

Whereas, others experienced problems coping with teachers speed during learning in class. These participants suggested that teachers should slow down while teaching and writing on the board to accommodate them. They also said that they should be shown love and understanding and not be treated as people with disability. The issue of lack of formal training on how to teach left-handed pupils was also revealed in this study. Majority of the teachers who participated in this study reported that they were not trained on how to teach left-handed children because methods in our training institution are developed for the right-handed learners. Milsom, noted that the only help for left-handed children comes from either a left-handed teacher or a teacher with a left-handed child, implying that only teachers who experienced and understood the difficulties faced by left-handed learners first hand is aware of how to assist them during the learning process.

Teachers in the present study reported that there was no special equipment in their schools meant for left-handed learners. Some pupils said that they had difficulties in performing some tasks such as shaping letters well and chopping vegetables. These findings were consistent with (Coates, 1996; Hackey, 1997; Milsom, 1995) who found out

that equipment such as vegetable peelers, scissors, chairs, desks, computer key boards and musical instruments caused difficulty for left-hand users.

This study also revealed that there was no educational policy guideline on the teaching of left-handed learners in schools in Kenya. This special group of learners seem not to be important to the policy makers. The teaching and learning of this learners is therefore, left to teachers who do not possess knowledge and teaching skills required for left-handed pupils.

## CONCLUSION

Left-handed pupils consider themselves to be as good as the right-handed learners with regard to handwriting. Findings from this study revealed that left-handed pupils are not discriminated in our schools, apart from few teachers who still force them to change to the right-hand when writing and some pupils who make fun of them. As evidenced by this study, teachers in Kenya are not formally trained to teach left-handed pupils. Most methods in our teacher training institutions are developed for right-handed learners. The ministry of education on the other hand, does not have policy guidelines for left-handed learners in schools.

## RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations were made:

- ✓ Special equipment such as pencil grips, sharp pencils should be available to the learners to help them overcome the difficulties they face while writing. Chairs and desks specially designed for left-handed learners be provided in our schools.
- ✓ Teacher Educators should design curriculum that also cater for the needs of left-handed pupils.
- ✓ Prospective teachers should receive formal training on how to teach left-handed pupils.
- ✓ Workshops and seminars should be organized to sensitize teachers on issues concerning left-handedness.

More research needs to be conducted to increase empirical data on left-handed learners' experiences on a large scale. The future research can also consider investigating self-esteem of left-handed pupils compared with the right-handed pupils in Kenya.

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